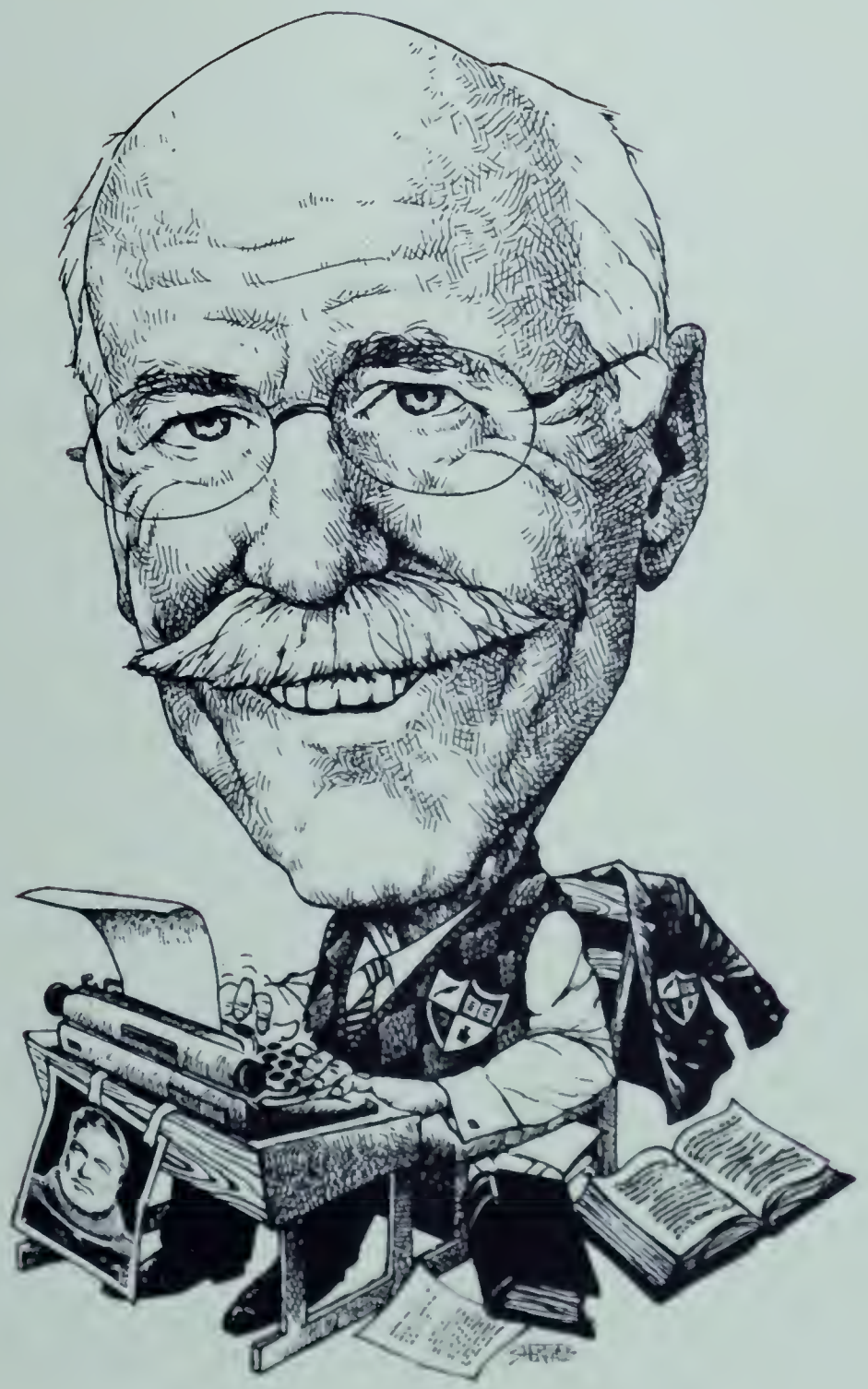
THE BIG READ

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

TOBIAS WOLFF'S

Old School

NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS

THE BIG READ

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

A great nation deserves great art.

The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

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The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

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Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine–state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six nonprofit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 25 years.

Additional support for The Big Read has also been provided by the **W.K. Kellogg Foundation**.

Published by

National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20506-0001
(202) 682-5400
www.nea.gov

Sources

Wolff, Tobias. *Old School*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.

Acknowledgments

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Graphic Design: Fletcher Design/Washington, DC

Image Credits

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July 20

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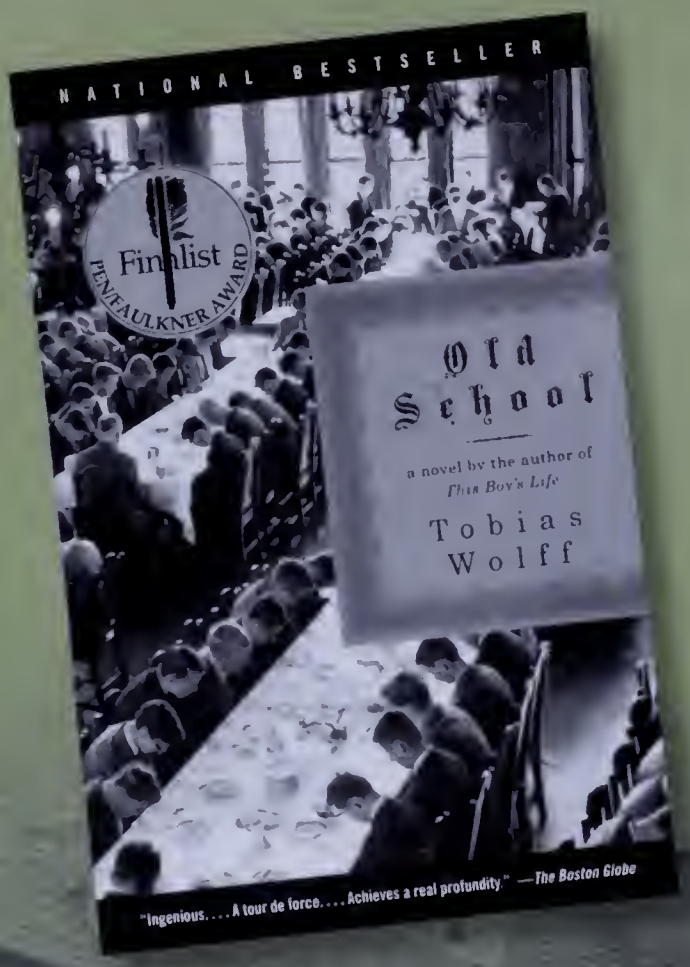


"Our school was proud of its hierarchy of character and deeds. It believed that this system was superior to the one at work outside, and that it would wean us from habits of undue pride and deference. It was a good dream and we tried to live it out, even while knowing that we were actors in a play, and that outside the theater was a world we would have to reckon with when the curtain closed and the doors were flung open."

—from *Old School*

Introduction

Welcome to The Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture. The Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become lifelong readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Tobias Wolff's classic novel, *Old School*. Each lesson has four sections: a thematic focus, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, The Big Read CD presents firsthand accounts of why Wolff's novel remains so compelling years decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, The Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD. Read and discuss Reader's Guide essays. Write a description of your school.

Homework: Read Handout One and the first chapter, "Class Picture" (pp. 3–25).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Discuss America today versus fifty years ago. Write about the narrator's inner conflicts.

Homework: Read Handout Two, "On Fire," and "Frost" (pp. 29–60).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Discuss the narrator's basic personality. Write a description of him from the point of view of another character.

Homework: Read "Übermensch" and "Slice of Life" (pp. 63–99).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Discuss the narrator's character development. Write about another character as a foil to him.

Homework: Read "The Forked Tongue" (pp. 103–127).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Discuss Wolff's use of metaphor and simile. Write a brief description that contains figurative language.

Homework: Read "When in Disgrace with Fortune" (pp. 131–152).

* Page numbers refer to the 2003 Knopf hardcover and 2004 Vintage paperback editions of *Old School*.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Discuss the narrator's views on fiction and his plagiarism. Write about a favorite book and its author.

Homework: Read "One for the Books" and "Bulletin" (pp. 155–175).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Discuss the desire to be understood. Write about the narrator's potential unconscious motives.

Homework: Read Handout Three and the novel's conclusion, "Master" (pp. 179–195).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Explore Wolff's view of human nature. Write about a turning point in the novel.

Homework: Make a final assessment of the novel's most important theme.

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Explore Wolff's treatment of the themes of the importance of literature, honesty and deception, and tolerance and acceptance.

Homework: Prepare outlines and begin essays.

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Activities: Evaluate the greatness of the novel and its most important theme. Defend the universal relevance of *Old School*.

Homework: Finish essays.

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Before winning a scholarship to a prestigious Eastern prep school, Tobias Wolff grew up in an isolated, working-class community in the Pacific Northwest. Thus, like the narrator of *Old School*, he felt himself to be something of an outsider among many classmates from backgrounds of great wealth and privilege. Like the narrator, he was forced to leave before graduation (in Wolff's case for academic reasons, not an issue of plagiarism). Also like the narrator, Wolff later enlisted in the Army and was sent to Vietnam, and ultimately he went on to become a well-known and successful writer.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD, Track One. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points learned from the CD.

Photocopy the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Biography" (pp. 6–7), and "Tobias Wolff and His Other Works" (pp. 12–13). Divide the class into groups. Each group will present a summary of the main points in its assigned essay.

Writing Exercise

Read the first three paragraphs of the novel to the class (pp. 3–4). Have your students write a similar description of their own school, touching on some of the same points that Wolff emphasizes: the economic and social backgrounds of the students, the school's expectations of them, the relative emphasis placed on areas such as academics, sports, and creativity.

Homework

Read Handout One: The Importance of Frost, Rand, and Hemingway. Read the first chapter, "Class Picture" (pp. 3–25). Prepare your students to read approximately 25–30 pages per night in order to complete reading this book in seven lessons.

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The greater part of the novel takes place between the autumn of 1960 and the spring of the following year. John F. Kennedy has just been elected president of the United States, and for many young people it is a time of great hope and promise. Of course, we read the novel—as Wolff wrote it—with the awareness that this climate will soon be shattered by Kennedy's assassination, the Vietnam War, and violent social upheaval in the United States.

In 1954 Ernest Hemingway, one of America's most popular authors, received the Nobel Prize for Literature "for his mastery of the art of narrative … and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style." Robert Frost was the most celebrated living poet in the United States. During his lifetime, he received four Pulitzer prizes for poetry. With each new book his fame and honors increased. Russian-born writer and philosopher Ayn Rand formulated *objectivism*, a philosophy in which she considered "the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." Rand presented this philosophy in her widely acclaimed novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

Discussion Activities

How would your students characterize the social, cultural, and political atmosphere of contemporary America? How do the writers portrayed at the beginning of the novel relate to our main character? What does the boys' excitement over their upcoming visits tell us about the motivations of these young men?

Writing Exercise

The whole episode involving Gershon highlights certain inner conflicts in the narrator's character. Have your students write a brief essay on this theme. Do they find themselves torn by conflicting loyalties or aspirations? How, if at all, do they resolve these issues?

Homework

Read Handout Two: Prep Schools: Fact and Fiction. Read "On Fire" and "Frost" (pp. 29–60). The exchange between Robert Frost and Mr. Ramsey (pp. 50–53) engages some of the main themes that the novel has raised thus far. Consider the ways the narrator relates the events. Is he a reliable narrator?

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using "I." A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third-person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters' thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

With the possible exception of the last chapter (a point that will be addressed later), *Old School* is told entirely in the first person by its unnamed central character. We are limited to his knowledge of facts, his awareness of events, and his insights into himself and others. This awareness and these insights undergo some significant changes with maturity, consistent with the novel's emphasis on human imperfection and learning through painful experience.

Discussion Activities

Based on the chapters read thus far, what sort of person does the narrator seem to be? Is he likable? Is he admirable? Do his assumptions about himself and about other people seem to ring true?

Writing Exercise

Have your students choose one of the other characters and, based on their interactions in the novel thus far, write a description of the narrator in the voice of and from the point of view of that character.

Homework

Read "Übermensch" and "Slice of Life" (pp. 63–99). List the three most prominent characteristics of Ayn Rand as she is portrayed. What statements and/or actions of hers support each of your choices?

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The narrator of *Old School* is himself clearly a work in progress over the course of the novel. The scorn and contempt he feels for almost everyone else after reading *The Fountainhead* (1943) is a clear indication of his immaturity, and his reaction to Ayn Rand herself and his consequent disavowal of her views lead him to a new depth of sensitivity and insight.

Discussion Activities

Discuss the way the narrator describes Ayn Rand. How does he feel about her before he meets her? Does his viewpoint change after meeting her? Is he fair? What instances of "weakness or ignorance" has the narrator displayed up to this point? What capacity has he shown to learn from his experiences and grow in understanding and depth of character?

Writing Exercise

Have students choose George Kellogg, Bill White, or Jeff Purcell and write a three-paragraph essay on how this character serves as a foil to the protagonist.

Homework

Read "The Forked Tongue" (pp. 103–127). Instruct students to pay particular attention to any instances of figurative language while they read. Why does the author title this chapter "The Forked Tongue"?

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have a significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually "like," "as," "than," or a verb such as "resembles." A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Wolff draws from ancient and medieval references to (ironically) imbue the young, unformed lives of the main characters with profundity. For example: the English masters as a "chivalric order" (p. 5), Jeff Purcell as "the Herod of our editorial sessions" (p. 13), the masters treating the students' spring exuberance "like the grousing of impotent peasants outside the castle walls" (p. 104), the Farewell Assemblies "Neronic in their carnality" (p. 112), and the title of the school literary magazine, the *Troubadour*.

Discussion Activities

Break the students into groups and ask them to find at least three instances of figurative language. Have them present to the class why they are figurative and how the words and phrases help shed light on the story. Discuss as a class the ways figurative language serves to illuminate larger thematic issues.

Writing Exercise

Read aloud the passage about the editorial meeting (pp. 119–121). Have the students write a brief essay discussing how the key points are conveyed through figurative language.

Homework

Read "When in Disgrace with Fortune" (pp. 131–152). Why does our protagonist feel he is the author of "Summer Dance"? Why doesn't he feel uneasy when he learns that he has won the competition or even when he is summoned to the headmaster's office?

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

One of the more remarkable aspects of *Old School* is the degree to which literature itself, especially fiction, is woven into the lives of the characters and the larger themes of the book. Mr. Ramsey is eloquent on this point in the passage on pages 131–132. Works of fiction can take on symbolic value. This is obviously the case with Jeff Purcell's first-edition copy of *In Our Time*. More subtly, the kinds of stories that one writes become symbols that reflect the kind of person their author is.

Discussion Activities

To illustrate the above point, reread to the class the narrator's comments on Hemingway and his stories (pp. 96–97) and his contrasting comments on himself and his own stories (pp. 108–110). With these passages as context, lead the class into a discussion of the narrator's discovery of, and plagiarism of, "Summer Dance" and the complexities of his relationship to that story.

Writing Exercise

Have the students write on the following theme: What is your favorite work of literature, movie, or piece of music? Why does it appeal to you? Discuss any symbols that occur in that particular work of art. If no symbols are present, ask students to discuss why symbols are not needed.

Homework

Read "One for the Books" and "Bulletin" (pp. 155–175). As the narrator has grown into a mature man and a successful writer, has he undergone any significant changes in his personality and/or his feelings about literature?

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

As an adult, the narrator has exchanged his youthful brashness and assertiveness for a more measured and reflective view of life, but in large part his transition into adulthood is one of continuity rather than change. The most significant phases of his development took place during his last year of prep school. His encounter with Susan Friedman shows that as a young man he is still awkward and tentative with women. His characterization of her dismissal of writing as an "impiety" (p. 163) shows him to be as committed as ever to his literary ideals. Of the entire group of young men who were mad about literature, he is the only one who has gone on to be a writer. But even much later in life, he remains insecure about his worth as a writer (p. 171), even as he demonstrates a prickly pride.

Discussion Activities

"Finally, one does want to be known," Mr. Ramsey says about Dean Makepeace (p. 172). How does this comment apply to the narrator, especially in relation to his guardedness about his Jewish heritage and his theft of "Summer Dance"?

Writing Exercise

When the narrator steals the story, do you think he has an unconscious desire to be expelled from school and/or exposed as a fraud? Write a one page essay on whether or not his expulsion can be considered a good thing.

Homework

Read Handout Three: The Narrator's Coming of Age. Read the novel's conclusion, "Master" (pp. 179–195). In what ways does Makepeace's story parallel that of the narrator? In what ways do the stories differ?

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The last chapter of *Old School* is, in its own way, a genuine surprise ending, with its sudden shift of focus and point of view. To begin with, we might ask who is telling Arch Makepeace's story. The answer that suggests itself is that the narrator of the novel is simply passing along what Mr. Ramsey had told him in Seattle. But reread the paragraph beginning at the bottom of p. 173: "He kept it short, but … I was somehow given to know more than was actually said. The spaces he left empty began filling up even as he spoke." In a sense, then, we may regard the last chapter as the narrator's imaginative reconstruction of the dean's life and character—a full-fledged example of literary art.

Like the narrator, Arch Makepeace has carried a burden of concealment, chafing at the idea that others' good opinion of him is founded, at least in part, on misunderstanding. (Recall his reaction on reading "Summer Dance": "He … was most affected, and in fact discomfited, by its unblinking inventory of self-seeking and duplicity. It was hard to tell the truth like that" [p. 186].) In the end, his punishment, his "sentence," is much briefer and less severe than that of the narrator.

Discussion Activities

Wolff writes: "The boy closest to them smiles into his punch glass. He can hear them; he has slipped into their camp and can hear the secret music of these sure and finished men, our masters" (p. 175). Are the masters "sure and finished men"? How does this relate to the last section of the novel, "Master"? Finally, how might this draw out a larger theme of the novel?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a one-page essay on a turning point in the novel. Where does the plot begin to change? Have students choose a turning point and explain why they think the novel revolves around this point.

Homework

Review the novel. Ask students to select the one theme they believe is the most important issue in the novel. They should find places where this theme emerges and be prepared to present their ideas to the class.

Lesson 9

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *Old School* makes about the following themes:

The Importance of Literature

From the discussion of William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" in the opening chapter through the previously cited exploration of Hemingway's short fiction and Mr. Ramsey's observations on the need for stories, the novel makes a sustained, passionate defense of the significance of fiction to our lives. What claims are made for fiction beyond mere distraction or amusement?

Honesty and Deception

> Poised right on the brink, I still held back, perhaps sensing that the moment it started, once I allowed myself the comfort of his interest, I wouldn't be able to stop; that the relief of confessing this paralysis might betray me into other confessions. In some murky way I recognized my own impatience to tear off the mask, and it spooked me (p. 118).

Why does the narrator hide the truth about himself? Why does he want to confess? Which of these impulses does the novel affirm?

Tolerance and Acceptance

> For years Arch had traced this vision of the evil done through intolerance of the flawed and ambiguous, but he had not taken the lesson to heart. He had given up the good in his life because a fault ran through it. He was no better than Aylmer, murdering his beautiful wife to rid her of a birthmark (p. 193).

What is the lesson here, and why does it need to be taken to heart?

Homework

Ask students to begin their essays, using the essay topics in this guide. Outlines are due during the next class period.

10

Lesson 10

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Old School*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Wolff create in *Old School*? Does this novel speak for more than one man and his personal concerns? What does this voice tell us about the choices and responsibilities of life for a sensitive person in contemporary America?

Divide students into groups and have each group determine the single most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, with references from the text. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?

Writing Exercise

Does this novel succeed in telling a story that speaks to and about all young men, not just those in the limited world of private school students? Does the novel tell a story about human beings in general? Why or why not? Write a one-page essay explaining whether the author succeeds in reaching a broad audience. If you disagree, explain why the author fails to reach a general audience. What advice might you give to the author so that he might reach more young readers?

Homework

Students will finish their essays and present their essay topics and arguments to the class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novel. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. Despite everything that happens, the narrator never wavers in his pride and love for his school. Why do you think he is so attached to the school?
2. There are few women in the book, but the narrator's interactions with them tell us some important things about him. Discuss this in connection with Lorraine, Patty, and Susan Friedman.
3. Ayn Rand is by far the most negatively portrayed character in the book. What is there about her, both personally and philosophically, that is so opposed to the spirit of the novel?
4. After almost telling an embarrassing story about George Kellogg, the narrator observes: "If, as Talleyrand said, loyalty is a matter of dates, virtue itself is often a matter of seconds" (p. 44). What does this mean? How does it relate to the novel's assumptions about human nature?
5. Other than the narrator and the three real-life authors who appear in the book, which character do you like or admire the most? Which one do you like or admire the least? Explain your choices.
6. Both the narrator and (on pp. 139–140) Bill White consider "Summer Dance" to be "their" story? Why does each of them feel this way?
7. Read Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark." The narrator refers to this story (p.193) by claiming that Arch "was no better than Aylmer." How does Hawthorne's story get at one of the main themes of the novel? Not only does Arch's character struggle, but the narrator struggles with his Jewish roots. How do both characters reconcile their birthmarks? Are they better or worse than Hawthorne's Aylmer?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Show the class a film set at a prep school—*A Separate Peace* (1972), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *School Ties* (1992), or *The Emperor's Club* (2002). How does the movie's portrayal of the prep school experience compare with that of the novel?

2. On page 29 the narrator tells the story of the Blaine Boys. Are there any interesting stories in your school's history? Research the school's background and make a public presentation of your findings, with illustrations if possible.

3. Divide the class into three groups and have each group prepare a presentation on one of the three real-life authors who figure in the novel. Each presentation should include biography, photographs and other illustrations, a display of books by the author, and the reading of excerpts from the author's work.

4. Show your class the DVD of the 1949 film of *The Fountainhead*, starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal. Following the screening, lead a class discussion to explore how well the movie matches up with the portrayal of Rand in *Old School*. (Research the degree of Rand's participation in the making of the film and what she thought of the finished product).

5. Have a drama day in class. Divide the class into four groups, and have each group prepare and mount a staged version of one of the following: Frost's "Death of the Hired Man," published in *North of Boston* (1914); Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," published in *Men Without Women* (1927); a scene from Rand's play *Night of January 16th* (1934); the expulsion scene from *Old School*.

The Importance of Frost, Rand, and Hemingway

Much of the plot of *Old School* revolves around the scheduled visits of Robert Frost, Ayn Rand, and Ernest Hemingway, and the fierce competition among the students to win personal interviews with these authors. It may seem hard to believe nowadays, but there was a time not so long ago when the general public was familiar with the faces and even the personal lives of certain serious writers. Three of the most famous and recognizable writers of the time were the three selected by Tobias Wolff for inclusion in his novel.

Robert Frost is, without any question, the best-known and most popular American poet of the twentieth century. Virtually everyone knows not only his name but even the titles of some of his poems: "Mending Wall," "Birches," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Phrases from some of these works, such as "Good fences make good neighbors" and "Miles to go before I sleep," have entered the language and are cited by people who have no idea that they're quoting Frost. For a poet to achieve such popularity is rare enough; what is truly astounding is that Frost is also regarded by a great many critics and poets as the best and most important American poet of his time. The traditional structures of his poems and their often charming descriptions of nature appeal to a broad audience, but discerning readers also respond to his complex and often tragic presentation of human beings struggling to cope with a harsh and often terrifying world.

Ayn Rand's major novels, *The Fountainhead* (1943) and especially *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), have achieved a surprising popularity when one considers their length and demanding content. In each of these books, a strong protagonist unswervingly pursues his own vision without regard for the views of others or the compromises demanded of him by any individual or group. The hero of *The Fountainhead*, for instance, is an architect who chooses to blow up his own building rather than accept any modifications in its design. Rand's novels are especially appealing to young people, who are often inspired by what they see as her idealism and call to personal greatness. She is not held in high regard, however, by other writers and thinkers who generally find her presentation of human nature unrealistic and her philosophical views rigid and insensitive.

Ernest Hemingway was the dominant literary figure in America fifty years ago. Many admired him not only for his sharply observed and exciting novels and short stories, but also for his widely publicized life of deep-sea fishing, big-game hunting, and other manly pursuits. He is no longer the imposing figure he was then; much of his later writing is seriously flawed, and the macho lifestyle is now seen as the bravado of a desperately ill man. But his first two novels, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and many of his finest short stories are permanent contributions to the highest shelf of American literature. As Wolff acutely observes, much of Hemingway's importance lies in the brilliance of his craftsmanship—especially his ability to evoke emotional states and the natural world—and his emphasis on courage and stoicism in the face of all the forces in the world that rise up to destroy the human spirit.

Prep Schools: Fact and Fiction

Prep schools have been the setting for a number of very popular books and movies, including *A Separate Peace* (1972) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989). From overexposure to such works, one might form the impression that these schools are filled up with rich boys—some of them oversensitive and the rest insufferably arrogant—who react to the pressures put on them by their crass, domineering fathers by indulging in cutthroat competition, frequent fistfights, and an alarming appetite for self-destruction. Even beyond such crude stereotyping, phrases such as "prep-school background" or "prep-school mentality" commonly suggest wealth, privilege, social prominence and connections, and an inability to relate to—or even fully grasp the reality of—anyone who does not share those qualities. Needless to say, the reality is somewhat more complex.

Most of these books and movies are set in boarding schools, where the students live on campus in dormitories, just as many college students do. In fact, however, the great majority of prep schools in the United States are day schools, just like public high schools. Public schools are operated and maintained by local governments, usually cities and towns. Most of the time, they are funded by taxes on the homeowners that live within the school district. *Public* schools are free, and all students who live within the district are eligible to attend them. Private schools—and all prep schools are private—charge (sometimes very high) tuition and tend to be extremely selective in their admission procedures.

The word "prep" itself is, of course, short for "preparatory." For many students in public-school systems, high school is the final stage of their formal education. A prep school is intended not as the end of the process but as a middle step. What it seeks to prepare its students for is, in the short view, further study at a college or university. In the long view, it tries to prepare its students for careers, often in public service, and to prepare them for adult life itself. Thus, great stress is placed on academics, usually a traditional course of studies including history, literature, philosophy, and languages. There is also often an emphasis on athletics, and in some schools on religious practice, especially for purposes of character-building.

Many prep-school students are from wealthy and/or socially prominent families, whose members have attended the same school for generations, and who support their school with large financial contributions. But most prep schools, motivated by a sense of mission and obligation to society, have generous scholarship programs and make strong recruiting efforts. And these schools feel that they have failed in their mission if their graduates go out into the world with feelings of superiority and entitlement. What they strive for instead is to give their students a sense of purpose and responsibility, to inspire them with the awareness that those who are given the gifts of talent, wealth, and influence have an obligation to use those gifts in the service of others. As the headmaster in the novel says, "Schools like ours are vulnerable to criticism … There is some truth in these criticisms. Too much truth. But we are trying to do something here. We are trying to become something different and even admirable" (p. 144).

The Narrator's Coming of Age

Among its other qualities, *Old School* fits into the tradition of the Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, a work in which the protagonist goes through a process of maturing from adolescence to adulthood. Two classic examples of the Bildungsroman are the Charles Dickens novels *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861). In our own time, one might even say that the Harry Potter books, taken together, fit into the category.

At least since the time of Sophocles and Oedipus the King, down through Shakespeare's King Lear and many, many other works, much of the great literature of the Western world has been founded on a core set of assumptions: that those who foolishly believe themselves superior beings will sooner or later be forced to confront their own flaws and mistakes, and that from this recognition of our own limitations may come humility and a greater compassion for the weakness and imperfection of other people. Writers, critics, and teachers have always maintained that reading great literature and learning this lesson will help to make us more compassionate toward and tolerant of others. One of the many remarkable qualities of *Old School* is that it shows us that very thing—a young man becoming more understanding and accepting of others not only through personal encounters, but also through his encounters with works of literature.

From the very beginning, ignorance and misperception characterize the narrator in his dealings with other people, whether in the unintentional pain that he causes the janitor, Gershon, or his later misunderstanding (and subsequent discovery) of the reason for Bill White's sadness and withdrawal. The clear lesson of the Bill White episode is that we never really know what's going on with other people, and therefore we shouldn't be quick to judge.

Perhaps the book's most effective and moving example of how the narrator's ignorance and misunderstanding give way to deeper and more compassionate insight comes in connection with his grandfather and his grandfather's wife. When they visit him in the hospital, he is vaguely ashamed and dismissive of them. When he looks at them in the light of his reading of *The Fountainhead*, he is openly contemptuous of them. But when his personal exposure to Ayn Rand shows him the narrowness and heartlessness of her views, he comes to recognize their decency and their love for him. Through this experience, as well as through his reading of Hemingway, he comes to embrace woundedness and imperfection as the reality of the human condition.

This lesson—the precariousness of human nature, the hidden sorrows in everyone's life—is one that he keeps learning over and over. It is not until many years later, for example, that he discovers that Mr. Ramsey's editing of the Hemingway interview for the school paper was motivated not by disrespect, but rather a desire to protect Hemingway from himself. As the narrator tells us late in the novel, "The appetite for decisive endings, even the belief that they're possible, makes me uneasy in life as in writing" (p. 169). Clearly, at least part of the reason for his uneasiness is his knowledge that we never achieve perfection, that our own pride and arrogance must be constantly resisted, and that the lesson of love and forgiveness must be learned again and again for as long as we live.

Teaching Resources

Web Sites

www.randomhouse.com
The publisher's web site contains biographical information on Tobias Wolff, a list of awards, and additional educational materials for teachers.

www.salon.com/dec96/interview961216.html
The Salon web site features a 1996 interview with Tobias Wolff that includes biographical information and a discussion of his writing.

news-service.stanford.edu/stanfordtodayed/9809/9809fea101.shtml
Stanford University's web site contains an interview with the author.

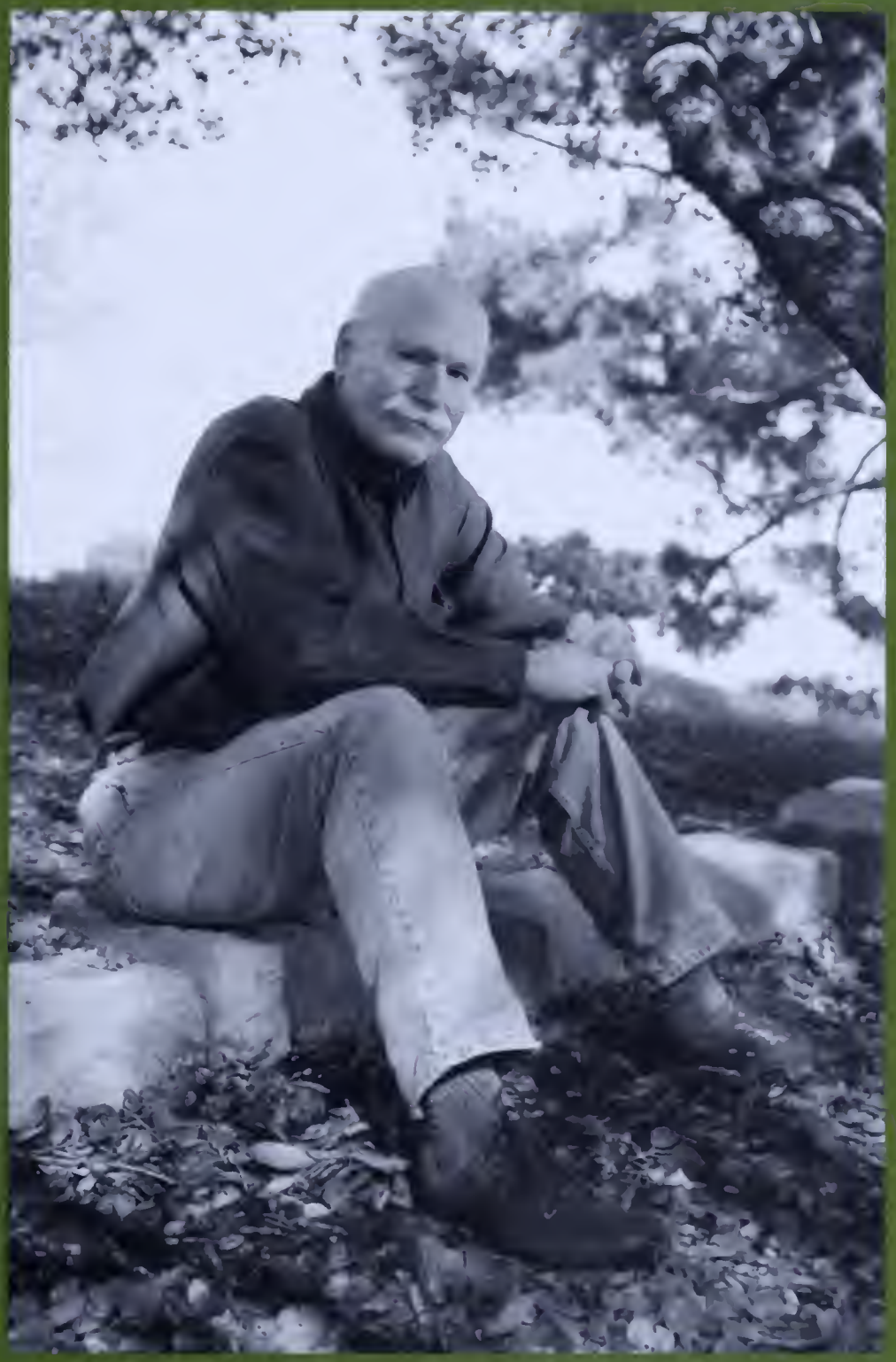
www.theatlantic.com/doc/200311u/int2003-11-12
The Atlantic's web site features a discussion of *Old School* with Tobias Wolff conducted by writer Curtis Sittenfeld.

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



"There is a need in us for exactly what literature can give, which is a sense of who we are, beyond what data can tell us, beyond what simple information can tell us; a sense of the workings of what we used to call the soul."

—TOBIAS WOLFF

from *Stanford Today* interview

"Make no mistake, he said: a true piece of writing is a dangerous thing. It can change your life."

—TOBIAS WOLFF
from *Old School*

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

THE BIG READ

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

A great nation deserves great art.

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES